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ABSTRACT

The paper gives reasons why the type of social studies genuinely committed to the education of citizens in a democracy has never flourished in the United States, though such education is crucial to the nation's survival. Social studies, as a discipline, should be utilized to solve social problems and not be a vehicle for imposing a particular political bias on students. There is the slavish use of exposition to transmit information merely to be held in memory. This type of study should not be equated with good citizenship education. Social problems are complex and require problem-solving ability that can only be learned through practice. Ideas about why problem-solving techniques have been rejected include: (1) Teachers teach as they were taught and their preparation leaves them incompetent to deal with controversy and uncertainty. (2) Teachers can avoid trouble by sticking to the textbook. (3) The textbook industry thrives on the expository method. (4) Ancient beliefs hold that education means that elders instruct the young, not that they work out problems together. (5) Ordinary people, though they can be part of an obedient, dependable work force, cannot be trusted to rule themselves. Education, in the past, "has had more to do with maintaining class structure than with opening up opportunity." Educators need to challenge the past and teach children in a manner more befitting democracy and the type of critical thinking skills required. (CBC)

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WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO THE SOCIAL STUDIES?

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September 26, 1986

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WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO THE SOCIAL STUDIES?

Paper Read at the Metcalf Colloquium

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There are two quite opposite ways to educate citizens of a state. In one it is assumed that the role of the citizen is to be a follower, one who conforms to the governance of the state, one who accepts whatever lot falls to him in deference to whomsoever is in power, one who defends the state unquestioningly whenever called upon to do so. This describes the relationship between the state and a citizen in all autocracies whether of the right or the left.

The other way assumes that the role of the citizen is to participate in the governance of the state, even to work to change the policies of the state. The good citizen is seen as a friendly and well informed critic of the state. This conception of the role of the citizen fits better the relationship of the state and it's citizens in a democracy.

This is a distinction which seems to be poorly understood by many citizens of this democracy and even by many, if not most, social studies teachers for many of the things we do in school in the name of citizenship education logically fit the needs of an autocracy better than those of a democracy. The authoritarian nature of citizenship education in this country has been attested to by every study of the social studies that has been made in

recent years. Democratically oriented citizenship education seems to be the exception rather than the rule in our schools. Among the common practices which logically fit autocracy better than democracy are the slavish use of the over simple, single version textbook which is to be memorized rather than questioned, the obsession with so called correct answers which are to be held in memory in lieu of a genuine search for true answers, the dominance of teacher talk usually in the expository mood which is taken as gospel not to be doubted, and the almost complete avoidance of the controversial. This is really a sorry arsenal of tools if democratic citizenship is our goal.

As Gunnar Myrdahl pointed out years ago nothing is better calculated to maintain the status quo in a society that the straight exposition of history while leaving out the assumptions, the caveats, and the qualifiers which all historians make in writing history (Myrdahl 1944. Vol. II, pp. 1041-1057) and, it might be added, without a sense of the problematic which invests all historical study. There is little about this process that produces the critical and independent minds that democracy requires. Nor has this practice which dominates social studies teaching today changed very much in the 75 years since the social studies movement began.

Studs Terkel hit upon the important distinction between citizenship education in an autocracy and citizenship education in a democracy when in commenting on the recent celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty, he noted what he called the obsessive regard for patriotism. Where he said, was the recognition of the critics in our society many of whom came

into our country within the very shadow of the statue that we celebrate and many of whom were perhaps more responsible than the so called patriots for building the enduring strength of this nation. Is criticism becoming out of style or perhaps, with some, it was never in? It is easily observed today that critics have a hard time of it in schools and out. Rather than being respected as they should be they are frequently silenced, reviled and persecuted, often by the government itself, and even by school teachers. It is a chilling thought that critics are so easily mislabeled as communists and unpatriotic even by some leaders in our government. It is possible that there is a relationship between the undemocratic attitude toward the critics in the public domain and the authoritarian mold of so much that passes in our schools for citizenship education?

Contributing to our failure to develop citizenship education appropriate to a democracy is confusion in our thinking in at least four matters important to such development.

1) We continually confuse the study of a discipline or perhaps I should say the study of human phenomena after the manner of a discipline with teaching a discipline in the strict expository mood in school. They are very different processes with different outcomes. The first may contribute to the development of critical ability which democratic citizens need; the second contributes more to the development of the unquestioning minds upon which autocracy thrives. Even some of the best friends of disciplined study violate this distinction. For instance, the history professor who, as a scholar, studies his field with great objectivity, holding to any conclusions he may reach as a result of his study

with great tentativeness, treating even accepted conclusions as if they were hypotheses rather than facts, forever arguing his position with other professors and frequently accepting fundamental changes in what he claims to be true, once he has laid aside his scholarly eyeshades and come before his class in History 101 as Herr Professor, lectures as if he knows all the answers, not once recognizing the assumptions and caveats that underlie all of his conclusions and infrequently, if ever, suggesting that there may be other scholarly acceptable versions or interpretations of the events he purports to describe and to interpret. Sitting in his class, no doubt, there are future high school history teachers who will go out to their high school classes and teach history as it was taught them without warning their students that there may be errors in what they are being taught. Gross errors of historical interpretation have persisted in textbooks for years and teachers go on teaching them as true. But more important, students have not learned how to utilize historical study. Thus teaching history becomes almost a negation of the scholar study of history. But the important thing to note, for citizens of a democracy, is that whereas disciplined study may hold out the possibility of teaching students to be critical and it may teach them how to be critical, the straight exposition of history may teach them just the opposite, to accept as true whatever they are told by authorities. It may render them incapable of criticism.

Lest you think I am being too hard on historians and history teachers I will say that it is my opinion that economists and economics teachers may be the worst offenders in this matter. A field riven by disagreement among scholars is frequently reduced

to one version as it is taught in Economics 101 and in high school economics, the gospel according to Adam Smith. Even Adam would probably turn in his grave at the oversimplification and distortion which have been imposed on his ideas to fit not scientific but political ends. If the study of disciplines is to contribute anything to citizenship education in a democracy they must be taught honestly, warts and all, and not as vehicles for imposing a particular political bias on students. Even better, disciplines should be utilized in thinking about, and perhaps, solving social problems.

All of this is not to say that there is no usefulness in exposition. Quite the contrary, exposition is absolutely necessary in the transmission of information. Its usefulness depends, however, on how information is used. If merely "received into the mind," that is memorized, as "innert ideas" as Alfred Whitehead suggests "without being utilized, or tested or thrown into fresh combinations" it is "not only useless" but "above all things harmful" (Whitehead, 1929 p. 1). To be useful information transmitted by exposition must be immediately used in thinking about or solving some important question or problem. It is confusion in our thinking between this intellectually demanding process and the slavish use of exposition to transmit information merely to be held in memory that is the root of the problem.

2) A second mistaken idea persists in our thinking that the social sciences and history, taken together or separately, are a sufficient content for citizenship education. There are so many things wrong with this idea that I cannot possibly explore them all within the limits of this paper. The insufficiency and in

some respects inappropriate nature of a citizenship education program based solely on the study of the social sciences and history, even if these are studied as disciplines should be studied, was brilliantly laid out years ago by Fred M. Newman (Newman, 1967) who argued persuasively that the very question which social scientists study are different both in kind and in scope from the questions with which citizens must learn to cope. Importantly, the question with which citizens must deal always ultimately involve questions of moral judgement toward which the study of the social sciences have little to contribute. In fact, the models for making moral judgements are more likely to be found in literature, art, music, religion, journalism, and philosophy than in the social sciences and history. Of course some historians behave more as moral philosophers than as scientific historians, a fact frequently overlooked in the expository teaching of history.

As Henry Steele Commanger recently pointed out it is much more important to judge history than to remember it (Commanger, 1985, p. 471). For instance, it is probably more important for young citizens in a democracy to learn how to cope with such questions as "Was John Brown and his followers of Harper Ferry fame right or wrong in what they did there" and "were the events that surrounded the Hay Market Square affair matters of which we should be proud or ashamed" than it is to know only what took place during these famous episodes in history. These are the kinds of questions which are of central importance to the democratic citizen but they are questions into which an exclusive study of the social sciences and history does not take us.

3) Increased recognition that the development of problem

solving ability is critical to the development of citizenship in a democracy has been dissipated by confusion over the nature of a social problem and lack of clarity about how a social problem is studied and resolved. Questions merely that may be answered, if superficially, by reference to authority such as a textbook or the teacher's word are confused with problems. Inquiry, a word much in vogue of late, is frequently reduced to the process of looking superficially for the answers to such questions. The study of social problems has been confused with studying about social problems including ready made solutions. Even the famous Committee of 1916 with its concern for the study of social problems made this error. Questions become problems only if there is genuine doubt about the answer. Inquiry may occur only if there is genuine uncertainty as between alternative solutions or if no immediate solution is in sight. Social problems exist when there are real perplexities about what to believe or how to behave or what course of action to follow. Social problems invariably involve judgements between conflicting values as well as the fact of the case. It is in the working out of at least tentative accommodations to such problems that the citizen of a democracy needs all the skill he can muster. The complex nature of social problems and how one teaches students to deal with them is most ably treated in a book "Teaching High School Social Studies", by Maurice P. Hunt and Lawrence E. Metcalf. (Hunt, 1955, Chs. 2-8)

4) There is confusion about how problem solving ability is learned. The idea persists that children cannot engage in problem solving until such time as all or most of the facts involved are learned and held in memory. This is an extremely

doubtful proposition which flies directly in the face of how scholars and for that matter any thinking adult goes about problem solving. Hunches are made on the basis of a relatively small amount of loosely organized information and these hunches serve as guides for gathering other information that either support or disprove the hunch. At a later stage, hunches may become more definitive hypotheses to be tested. There is little reason to believe that children do not think very much as adults and there is good reason to believe that they can become quite good at it, certainly by the middle school years. A second idea persists that problem solving is learned by reading and talking about how it is done, that is, by formal instruction in problem solving. While such instruction may have usefulness, Jerome Bruner, famous student of problem solving was probably right when he said: "it is only through the exercise of problem solving ... that one learns the working heuristics of discovery; the more one has practice, the more likely one is to generalize what one has learned into a style of problem solving ... that serves for any kind of task encountered ... I have never seen anybody improve in the art ... of inquiring by any means other than engaging in it" (Bruner 1965, p. 94).

Now to turn more directly to the nature of the social studies today vis a vis these misconceptions. The social studies originated out of the concern of a very few scholars, teachers, and citizens that the teaching of formal disciplines, primarily history and geography, as practiced in schools up to the early 1900's provided an inadequate, even if an appropriate, preparation for democratic citizenship. With the publication in 1916 of the

Report of the Committee on Social Studies which seemed to declare the independence of citizen education from college entrance requirements and from the study of formal disciplines, two quite different lines of reform both calling themselves social studies were set in motion. One conceived the nature of citizenship education as being primarily that of transmitting the appropriate knowledge and good habits to children. This was really not much of a break from the past for teaching subjects more or less based on disciplines continued to be the mode of citizenship education. Education continued to be conceived as being a from the top down process, the all knowing elders, scholars, textbook writers, teachers and parents imparting their superior knowledge to youth which were supposed to learn from this process everything they needed to know to be successful adults and good citizens. There was little room under this concept for learning to deal with either the unprecedented change or the equally impressive problems with which adults in this same time period were trying to cope. It was a design for static education for a dynamic period; it was a design for maintaining the status quo.

Curriculum reform in this light was a matter of getting the information thought to be of most use into the curriculum by reorganizing the rubrics into which information was to be included, adding new subjects, modifying old subjects, changing the order in which subjects are to be taught, updating content, cramming as much information into the curriculum as possible, and inventing new gimmicks for enticing children to learn that which they had no immediate felt need for learning.

In this vein, we have tried to organize the teaching of the

disciplines in all kinds of orders, sequences and cycles; we have tried to organize teaching around concepts, generalizations, problems, and values; we have tried fusion, integration, orchestration, and correlation of social science disciplines; we have tried cases, projects, and contracts as organizing principles; we have prettied up our textbooks with maps, pictures, diagrams, graphs, charts, and a dozen other kinds of paraphernalia, we have thrown in audiovisuals and now computers. Even now the field is deeply engaged in the study of a new scope and sequence expected to resolve all the problems of educating citizens. To what end has all this, which is by all odds the prevailing approach to curriculum reform in our schools today, brought us? The dissatisfaction with the outcomes of citizenship education is about as great if not actually greater today than it was in the 1920's. We are confronted as before with indifferent students, apathetic and nonparticipating citizens, and colossal ignorance of the issues that confront our nation.

Paradoxically, the Committee of 1916 from which this line of development eminated, claimed to have been influenced by John Dewey's teaching. But they either never understood Dewey, which is quite possible, or they were too heavily influenced by the scholars in the disciplines who continue to insist to this day that the study of the disciplines is the sure road to good citizenship. In any case, what came out of the report of the committee was a subject matter curriculum and this is largely what schools have followed ever since. Even social problems which the Committee proposed should be studied were treated merely as topics with ready made solutions as proposed by the scholars rather than

the real problems that they were. In this same vein, as late as 1985, a committee of experts set up under the auspicious of the NCSS to explore what should be taught in school about nuclear power spent its time discussing what is safe to teach children about nuclear power rather than how can children be involved in studying the problem of nuclear power, certainly a problem for adults as well as children.

A second group of reformers better grounded in Deweyian thought took their cue for the content of the social studies from democracy itself which requires citizens of independent mind rather than lesson getting robots and from the young developing citizen as he struggles to understand and find his identity in a democratic society.

These reformers believed that the questions children ask together with the questions they can be encouraged and helped to ask was the proper starting point for citizenship in a democracy. They strove to substitute student posed questions for teacher posed questions. They strove to substitute thinking about and through problems with which children could identify or be helped to identify for what they saw as senseless memorization of facts unrelated to anything that children could see or be helped to see as a problem. They saw skill at problem solving including the command of disciplines rather then their mere memory together with a questioning attitude as the attributes of citizenship education most consistent with democracy. They were disdainful of the lock step, from the top down, teacher dominated, subject loaded, memoritor curriculum which persisted in schools as better suited for producing citizen soldiers than independent minded dem-

ocratic citizens.

Working along these lines a number of programs where developed in the 40's, 50's, and 60's which focused on the study of problems and the development of problem solving ability while eschewing the formal or memoritor study of disciplines. The best of these, taken together, held out the promise of developing a social studies which was logically related to the need of a democracy. Among the works produced in this vein a book authored by Lawrence P. Metcalf and Maurice P. Hunt, Teaching High School Social Studies, was, in the writers' opinion, by all odds the most imaginative and carefully crafted work in the field. As we all probably know, after a brief period of euphoria, in which the book was highly acclaimed by some and widely discussed in the field, for it was a book not easily dismissed, the book fell into disuse and like most of the other works of its kind was never widely practiced in schools.

Why? Why has most or all of the work intended to transform citizenship education into an intellectually demanding and thoughtful process, as did Dr. Metcalf's work, been rejected by the profession of teachers? Why has most or all of the work crafted to develop independent thinkers of the kind democracy requires rather than robotic memorized, why have these been largely rejected by the profession? Why have most or all of the programs based on teaching or learning principles consistent with the development of critical minded and open-minded citizens been rejected in favor of associationists principles even by University Professors of Education? Why have the only programs that have had any real validity as social studies even as defined by the Commit-

tee of 1916 been rejected in favor of the largely memoritor study of single version textbooks based on disciplines?

There are a number of reasons for this intellectual aberration. Some of the reasons are fairly obvious and with a little good sense could be easily corrected; others, far more subtle and pernicious in nature lie deep in our cultural biases and are not so easily dealt with.

1) It is fairly obvious that teachers are themselves the product of a system of education which even in the university places the emphasis on remember, cram, and quiz with little opportunity to criticize, argue with or think about either the truth or the meaning of what they are learning. Can teachers be blamed for teaching as their university professors teach? There is far too little opportunity in University classes, and the social sciences and history are frequently the worst offenders, to learn how to verify the facts being memorized or how to deal with questions that have no clear cut answers, or how to think ones way through problems that cut across subject matters lines or how to make the moral judgements that are involved in nearly every really important question. The preparation which teachers receive leaves them incompetent to deal with controversy and uncertainty. This is clearly a fault of University education and particularly it is the fault of how so called scholarly disciplines are taught in Universities.

2) Lower school teachers hardpressed at best to make it through the day where they must frequently teach five or six classes and meet 150 or more students, with only the models provided by their University professors to follow, and not really

knowing how to deal with uncertainty or with open questions that do not have answers and not knowing how to think through a problem where answers are seldom final, take the easy way out, a way with which we are all too familiar. By sticking to the straight exposition of the textbook, asking only trivial questions, avoiding questions the answers to which are controversial and discouraging students from asking them, discouraging students from expressing doubt or from speculating or hypothesizing about anything, avoiding other possible versions of events and skirting moral issues within questions, the teacher can feel secure, in complete control of the situation, and can get safely through another school day and incidentally, unwittingly serve the purpose of turning out passive, uncaring, uninvolved, conforming citizens, just the kind democracy can well do without. They can also avoid trouble from a meddling public.

3) A contributing factor here is the text book industry which thrives on the expository mood. Utilizing the expository mood text book companies are able to produce millions of copies of a textbook, all exactly alike, and in the process, make a handsome profit. Textbook companies are challenged beyond their capabilities by an open ended curriculum, raising unpredictable questions and taught in the hypothetical mode as our brief encounter in the 1970's with the "new social studies" demonstrated. Thus we have teachers who shun the uncertain waters of controversy and textbooks companies who make millions out of producing uniform, single version textbooks in great quality allied against the open, questioning curriculum.

4) There is, however, a deeper and largely unnoticed reason

why teachers behave in this way. There is an ancient belief, long predating democracy and buried deep in the folkways, which holds that education consists of the elders instructing the youth in the wisdom of the tribe. As Margaret Mead (Mead, 1943) has dramatically demonstrated this filled very well indeed, the needs of youth in primitive societies where change was almost nonexistent. But this conception of education has clearly outlived its validity. Today, change comes at a dazzling pace and less and less distance separates adults from youth in experience and wisdom. Such an idea is clearly out of tune with democracy to which change and progress are endemic. Still it is an idea that persisted among many adults and many teachers. It is clearly Mr. Reagan's concept of education which emphasizes discipline by which he means lesson getting and not disciplined study while hardly recognizes that problems exist and it seems also to be the concept of Education being promulgated by Secretary Bell who is forever emphasizing discipline. Many parents, even those who out to know better, expect their children to be taught in school rather than in any true sense to be educated. Many teachers see transmission of knowledge as their primary task and even those whose own lives are beset with problems would deny children the right to think about their problems. Such an attitude toward education as being an open and shut matter clearly runs counter to the idea of a democracy where people including children, are more appropriately seen as working out their problems together.

5) But there is a far more pernicious reason why the teaching of independence of thought and problem solving are resisted in this country. It is the persistence of the belief that the ordi-

nary people cannot be trusted to rule themselves, that some kind of upper or privileged class must always hold the reins of governance. This will quickly be recognized as the reasoning by which kings and tyrants, sometimes with the ready acquiescences of the oppressed, have always justified their privileged position in society but as James MacGregor Burns has pointed out in his books "The Deadlock of Democracy" and "The Deadlock of Democracy Revisited" we in America have always tended to equivocate on this question emphasizing at times Republicanism and at other times class rule. Thus in the heat of the movement for Independence we were able to produce the Declaration of Independence, an immortal statement for democracy, and later, the Bill of Rights embodied in the first ten Amendments of the Constitution which clearly followed republican principles but at the same time the Father's, looking over their shoulders at Shay's Rebellion, crafted a framework of government in the Constitution which limited voting to people of property, protected slavery, and guaranteed the preeminence of property over human rights.

As Samuel Bowles and many others have pointed out public education has not guaranteed an open society where any citizen can rise from the lowliest background to high position according to his ability as was the promise of education in a democracy. The rich, while sending many of their own children to private schools, have supported public education, sometimes grudgingly, not because it held out the possibility of producing independence of mind, but because it taught such good habits to the newly arriving immigrants as punctuality, a work ethic, work skills, obedience to rules and patriotism to the nation, all traits that were thought

to insure a dependable and obedient work force. Public education today seems to have more to do with maintaining the class structure than with opening up opportunity. (Bowles, 1973)

Throughout our history efforts to move the nation toward greater Republicanism thought in some measure successful as with the abolition of slavery, adoption of the principle of progressive taxation and other progressive reforms of Theodore Roosevelt's day, the welfare state legislation of Franklin D. Roosevelt's time, the civil rights movement and extension of voting rights in the 60's have always been followed by a period of reaction in which gains previously made for republicanism are limited or even taken away (Reich, 1985,Ch. I;Burns, 1986, p.2,12). We seem to be in just such a period right now. We are about to see, for instance, with the connivance of the leadership of both parties in Congress, the passage of a so called tax reform bill which grossly favors the rich and largely does away with the principle of progressive taxation, a democratic principle to which we have adhered for nearly 100 years. Basic democratic principles such as separation of church and state, freedom of speech and the press, the right of privacy in the home, the right to assemble and express grievances, even the right to vote are under attack from a powerful and well heeled right. Frequently allied with fundamentalist religious groups who seem to prosper on ignorance, they are ready to control the press, to dictate what the schools may and may not teach and to deny to the schools the right to discuss controversial issues in any balanced fashion. At the same time they oppose any measures which would limit what the wealthy may spend to influence governmental policy. According to a distinguished stu-

dent of democracy, John R. Schmicthauser, professor of political science at the University of California at Los Angelos the representative function today is so weighted on the side of the powerful that it is detrimental to any even handed resolution of contemporary issues. (Schmicthauser, 1986, P. 11)

For whatever reason, lust for wealth and power or lack of understanding, more of our citizens than we would like to think are really hostile to democracy. They do not want the schools to teach their children to think. And many teachers cave in to the pressures emanating from such citizens. These find the subject matter curriculum a safe haven from controversy. Dr. Metcalfs book was not only a great book but, as befitting a democracy, it was a book full of risk for those who dared to use it.

It is for this assortment of reasons, great and small, that a social studies genuinely committed to the education of citizens for a democracy has never flourished in the land. As Professor Burns, cited earlier, suggests in his work, Democracy in this country is still up for grabs, (Burns, 1986, p. 19). It should be clear that a social studies more along the lines of Dr. Metcalf's work is crucial to its survival.

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